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Skepticism Clouds Nerve Gas Charge

I've already reported that the Russians are using poison gas to flush the ragged Afghan rebels from their mountain hideouts. Now there is alarming evidence that the Russians have developed a new "nerve" gas capable of incapacitating its victims long enough for troops to move in for the kill.

The Carter administration apparently has the evidence in hand, but has not made it public. The result is widespread skepticism of the U.S. charges, not only among Third World nations but also among our allies. Like the shepherd boy who cried "Wolf!" too often, the United States may find its claims doubted even when it actually produces hard evidence against the Soviets.

What seems to have happened is that Congress and the White House have been given conflicting interpretations of the available evidence by the various intelligence agencies.

For example, at a recent top-secret Defense Intelligence Agency briefing for Congress, some of the Pentagon experts expressed their opinion that the Soviet Union has been using a newly developed gas that paralyzes its victims. Yet they could offer no evidence of followup attacks by infantry or artillery that would fit the scenario they had worked out.

Meanwhile, Central Intelligence Agency briefings have stressed that there is no hard evidence that will either confirm or belie the allegations of chemical warfare, much less of a new "nerve" gas.

Another region that has produced numerous reports of gas attacks is Southeast Asia. Laotian tribesmen have repeatedly given U.S. representatives detailed accounts of deadly poison gas at-

tacks. But here again, convincing physical evidence has been scant.

"The fact is that there is no physical evidence," a State Department official told my reporter Lucette Lagnado. "The evidence we have is largely circumstantial."

A congressional expert explained: "There will always be doubt until there is an actual canister, or a body, or a physical sample on which chemical tests can be performed with verifiable results. We do not have a body. We did have [evidence]... but it was too old."

In short, the consensus in the intelligence community is that the reports of Soviet gas attacks merit a thorough investigation. Where there's that much smoke, they feel, there may well be a fire — but meanwhile, the United States shouldn't sound the alarm without proof.